Aftermath: Art in the Wake of World War One
'Remaking Society'
Dorothy Price

> 'I wish those people who write so glibly about this being a holy war…could see a case of mustard gas - the poor things burnt and blistered all over with great mustard coloured suppurating blisters, with blind eyes, all sticky and stuck together, and always fighting for breath, with voices a mere whisper, saying their throats are closing and they know they will choke…' Vera Brittain *Testament of Youth*, 1933

Vera Brittain's poignant memoir, her witness to war and to the lives of a generation of young men lost to it, confronts us unequivocally with the physical horrors of trench warfare wrought on the bodies of young men during the First World War. Indeed, visual images of damaged and mutilated bodies proliferated in the aftermath of war, as many artists struggled to come to terms with the violence and brutality that they and their comrades had endured on the battlefields. Yet whilst the physical experiences of war are viscerally palpable in much post-war art, particularly in iconic works by artists like Otto Dix, there is also poignant emotional symbolism in the work of many others. CRW Nevinson's *Paths of Glory* (1917) (no. x) or Paul Nash's *Wire* (1918-19) (no. x) both index the lacerating horrors of the trenches on the bodies of men to different degrees, Nevinson physically, Nash symbolically. Wilhelm Lehmbruck's optimistic *Ascending Youth*, (fig. x) striving upwards, full of hope and made in the milieu of the international avant-garde in Paris only a year before the outbreak of war, paired with his desolate and defeated *Fallen Man*, (no. x) executed in Berlin in 1915, (having been expelled from Paris as an 'enemy alien' and now employed as an orderly in a military hospital), bookend the unprecedented catastrophe of this war. Their posthumous tragedy is invariably heightened when we learn of Lehmbruck's suicide in 1919. These two sculptures, it seems to me, succinctly tell the story of naïve optimism and bitter defeat that marked the destruction and disappearance of the heroically idealised male body on an unprecedented scale in just four years, between 1914 and 1918. Remaking society in the aftermath of such a devastating war in which over ten million young men died on the battlefield of Europe (and which was followed by the brutal Spanish flu pandemic, in which another forty million or so

people worldwide were wiped out - about a quarter of a million in Britain), was not an easy prospect. For those of Europe's soldiers who managed to limp home from the horrors of the trench, (often in various states of able-bodiedness), peace-time conditions remained grim. Across Britain, France and Germany in varying degrees they were met by economic hardship, mass unemployment, high prices, poor housing and widespread poverty. In Germany, the Kaiser had abdicated and civil war erupted on the street. Political instability and a decimated economy set the tone for the decade to come.

Lehmbruck's elegiac sculpture to the tragedy of male youth in *Fallen Man*, offers a restrained, melancholic and contemplative space for imagining the trauma of the individual soldier wrecked by the maelstrom of war; yet like all of Lehmbruck's figure studies, the body remains intact; it becomes a vehicle for the outward expression of inner emotion. The monumental bronze form, bowed in utter despair, allows the viewer space for emotional empathy without aesthetic revulsion. But one thing about the First World War was certain: the body of the frontline soldier rarely remained intact. Male bodies were repeatedly maimed and there were more amputations conducted during this war than any before or since.[1] Despite this, veterans with facial injuries were often excluded from the public discourse around disability and recovery; photographs of soldiers with facial injuries (of whom there were significantly more than those who had limb amputations) were generally kept out of the popular press reports about advances in surgical treatments and prosthetic reconstruction.[2] Yet artists like Henry Tonks, who was both a fine art tutor at the Slade School in London (subsequently appointed Slade Professor in 1918), as well as a trained surgeon, is exceptional in the British context for his portraits of soldiers with facial injuries sustained during the conflict, whom he drew from life, as part of his work for Harold Gillies' plastic surgery unit at the Cambridge Hospital in Aldershot from 1916. (fig. x)

In his role as draughtsman, Tonks' job was to record the facial surgeries of patients, before and after operation, as a supplement to accompanying black and white photographs

that medically recorded and archived their treatment. Yet beyond these functional, diagrammatic drawings, Tonks also produced a series of pastel portraits of the patients whom he encountered, also depictions of before and after surgery. It is these delicate renditions in colour, 'fragments' as he called them, that move beyond surgical documentation to raise questions of aesthetic vulnerability and loss.[3] Tonks returns to these men the possibilities of an interior life that the medical gaze of documentary photography and accompanying surgical diagrams had excised. The identities of the young men whom Tonks recorded would never be the same again, no matter how much surgery or prostheses they endured; the pastel portraits offer a moving testimony to the visceral horrors of war on the faces of the men who survived it.

Much more aggressive and uncompromising renditions of the maimed, scarred and lacerated faces of soldiers are Otto Dix's brutal monochromatic etchings of disfigured and mutilated men rotting in the mud where they fell. (fig. x) In 1914 Dix had volunteered for military service and unlike most of the artists of his generation, he ended up fighting and, remarkably, surviving the full four years of battle, mostly as a machine gunner in the trenches of the western and eastern fronts. He was injured five times and awarded the Iron Cross for bravery in 1915. During this time, he continued to sketch. Between 1914 and 1918 he produced a remarkable body of works on paper, small in size and rendered in gouache but mainly in black chalk - portraits of soldiers entangled in conflict, self-portraits in various guises and sketches of the cratered, war torn landscapes in which they fought daily for survival:

> 'The war is something animalistic: hunger, lice, mud, those insane odours. Everything is completely different. You know, standing in front of earlier paintings, I had the feeling that one side of reality was not being depicted at all: the ugly. War was a terrible thing but nevertheless something powerful, I definitely could not neglect that! You have to have seen people in this untamed state to know anything about them.[4]

In the immediate post-war years, Dada Dix revelled in the iconoclastic anarchism that the German avant-garde afforded him. Bitingly satirical renditions of man-machines, former soldiers whose bodies were so eviscerated by war that they could barely function on civvy street; their bodies grotesquely malformed by inadequate prostheses, and all traces of potential empathy strangled by the sheer outlandishness of their situation. *Streichholzhändler, Kartenspieler, Kriegskrüppel* (no. x) are all drypoint etchings from 1920 and unmatched in the scathingly bitter attitude betrayed by their creator. These are early examples of Dix's newfound technique of which he famously observed that 'when you etch you're a complete alchemist.'[5] Many scholars have observed how the corrosive processes involved in the etching technique, in which large holes can be bored into the plate by acid, mimics the expressive potential of Dix's subject matter.[6] But it was not until 1924, on the tenth anniversary of the outbreak of war, that he deployed the destructive elements of the process to full effect in *Der Krieg.* This remarkable fifty-print etching cycle, divided into five portfolios containing ten prints each, became one of the most powerful graphic testimonies of the day against the Weimar Republic's tendency to valorise a heroic war. This tendency was at its most virulent in Ernst Jünger's popular right-wing novel *Storm of Steel* (first published in 1920 and revised for re-publication in 1924), a memoir of Jünger's wartime experiences as a soldier on the western front. Weimar audiences, demoralised by narratives of their nation's defeat could instead revel in Jünger's glorification of war and feel vindicated by the notions of noble sacrifice propounded therein. In visual terms, heroic imagery centred on the body of the ideal male warrior became a primary index of German patriotism during the Weimar era. Veterans who articulated the negative experiences of the war were increasingly 'branded as unpatriotic and cowardly.'[7] Such hostility towards them was further exacerbated by the widespread nationalist, conservative myth that the German army had not been defeated in the field but had been betrayed , 'stabbed in the back' by socialist revolutionaries at home.[8] It was against this background that Dix first produced his monumental painting *The Trench*

(1920-1923, now lost) swiftly followed by *Der Krieg*. With these works and others, Dix was making a powerful protest against peace-time narratives that consistently undermined and undervalued the veterans' lived experiences of the horrors of war. As post-war Germans were embracing the jazz age, their wounded, maimed and disabled veterans were being discarded as an embarrassing legacy of a failed conflict that no-one cared to be reminded of.

Depicting the inner life of the tormented war veteran became the concern of a completely different approach to the aftermath of war by Cologne based artist, Heinrich Hoerle. Hoerle had served at the Front for only a brief period from 1917 until the end of the war in 1918 but as with all survivors from this otherwise unimaginably barbarous period, the suffering induced by the war on the soldiers he witnessed in combat, left an indelible mark on his visual imagination and psychic stability. As Hal Foster observes of Max Ernst's immediate post-war Dada work, fragmented bodies serve as signs for 'a bashed ego' hovering between 'evocations of the narcissistic damage incurred during the war' and 'caution against the reactionary obsession with the body armour' of Fascism that followed.[9] A similar pattern can be discerned in Hoerle's oeuvre from the same period. His *Krüppelmappe* or *Cripple Portfolio* (fig. x) consists of twelve delicately executed lithographs asking viewers to 'Help the Cripple' and drawing attention to the plight of the individual war-wounded soldiers seeking to re-integrate themselves into a society and an economy unable and unwilling to properly support them after their bitter defeat. In the twelve plates, maimed and wounded veterans are shown in different roles: seeking comfort from loved ones; begging on the streets; haunted by missing limbs, mired in nightmares of exaggerated sexual fantasies; engulfed in both physical and psychological loss, and received with fear and horror by those around them. As the portfolio unfolds, a clear progression emerges from the first prints to the last. The first six plates consist of a politically engaged socialist critique of the daily inequities faced by former soldiers now crippled and reliant on ineffectual prostheses, whilst the second six plates chart their descent into a psychological and sexual hell. The

'crippled' war veterans of Hoerle's portfolio are ultimately left abandoned by society and haunted by their own psychological traumas and sexual fantasies. Hoerle's exploration of the traumatic post-war experiences of the horrors of the battlefield in the *Cripple Portfolio* remained a significant theme in his increasingly socially informed artwork in inter-war Germany. By 1930, the psychic realities of mental anguish made explicit in the *Cripple Portfolio* were supplanted in Hoerle's oeuvre by the material realities of the fragmented soldier's body, dependent on prosthetic limbs and memorialised in two striking paintings, *Monument to the Unknown Prostheses* and *Three Invalids* (*Machine Men*) (fig. x). The stylistic shift between the 1920 portfolio and the 1930s paintings are palpable. In the intervening decade, the prosthetic body became a visual paradigm for the era's fascination with human and machine, perhaps represented at its most futuristic in Fritz Lang's epic science fiction film *Metropolis* (1926). Hoerle remained unique in his depiction of the prosthetic body as both a site of empathy and a symptom of the worker's alienation within the mechanized environment of industrial technological labour. If the *Cripple Portfolio* was a passionate moral protest against the inhumanity of war, *Monument to the Unknown Prostheses* and *Three Invalids* were bitter acknowledgements of the sensory losses engendered by the post-war reconstruction of Weimar Germany. Their machine-aesthetic had become a dominant visual trope of the aftermath era but as artists like Alice Lex-Nerlinger demonstrate, it was an aesthetic that was no longer only confined to the depiction of the soldier's broken body.

Alice Lex-Nerlinger belonged to an emerging generation of post-war women, newly enfranchised and taking all the opportunities they could to carve creative careers for themselves. In the late 1920s she turned to photomontage in her search for an adequate pictorial language to critique the social conditions in which she and many women of her generation found themselves:

> '…we were all hot-headed young artists struggling to find new ways in painting. We had been acquainted with war and chaos. We had seen enough of the hollow, empty and mechanized effects of capitalism on culture. And what was a person's value in this system? - only as much as capitalism earned from his labour…'[10]

Influenced by Berlin Dadaist John Heartfield to use her art for political critique on behalf of the underprivileged, Lex-Nerlinger's preferred working tools were the photogram, stencil, scissors and spray gun. Collages such as *Ohne Titel (Prosthesen Mensch*) (fig. x) and *Arbeit, Arbeit, Arbeit* (*Work, Work, Work*), (no. x) both begun in 1928, were examples of Lex-Nerlinger's explicit drive to 'show how for the employer, the worker meant nothing more than a part of his machine, and in fact one that was easy to replace.'[11] Within the discourses of post-war capitalism, the maimed body of the First World War soldier for whom the new society no longer had a purpose, was dispensed with in favour of the alienated body of the machine-age labourer. But alienated male bodies of proletarian factory workers weren't Lex-Nerlinger's only concern and she is perhaps best known for her 1931 spray painting *Paragraph 218*. This iconic work was a polemical call to overturn paragraph 218 of the German constitution that restricted women's rights to abortion and birth control and was widely regarded by the political left to be detrimental to proletarian women in particular but also to the wider project of women's emancipation during the Weimar era.

Whilst across Europe the aftermath of war was a chaotic, depressing and debilitating time for its veterans, it was also a time of radical political, economic and social change for women. In 1918 in Britain, women who were householders and over the age of 30 gained the right to vote whilst in Germany it was awarded to women aged 20 and above. Women in inter-war Europe were experiencing changes in all aspects of their lives, from the desolate experiences of premature widowhood and bereaved motherhood, to the promise of a modern industrialised future in which technological advances would offer new efficiencies in the home and the workplace. The perceived increase of women in the public realm went hand in

hand with new forms of urban leisure and entertainment specifically targeted at female audiences. The media myth of the 'new woman', a trope popular in Europe and America since the late nineteenth century, was re-born for the era of mass entertainment, advertising and urban spectacle. Images of the new woman in multiple guises - from 'flapper' to 'garçonne', androgynous 'boy' to beautiful 'girl' - became a predominant subject matter for artists and illustrators alike. She circulated widely in the pages of the popular press and was a regular feature of fine art exhibitions. As a 'type', her identity was fluid and mobile. Her symbolic function ranged from role model to scape-goat; an active agent seeking sexual, economic and political emancipation for her generation *and* an empty sign constructed by the media to bolster advertising campaigns in a new age of rationalised production and American-inspired commodity culture. As a self-identified '*Neue Frau'* of the mid to late 1920s, Lotte Laserstein's painterly explorations of such media constructions demonstrated an implicit acknowledgement of their power but also a subtle interrogation of them. Her oeuvre drew heavily on the iconic tropes of metropolitan modernity - fashionable new women, androgynes, journalists, tennis players, motorbike riders - identifiable visual types, connotative of the era's media-saturated consumer economy. Yet a painting like *In the Tavern* (fig. x) differs markedly from works such as Otto Dix's *Portrait of the Journalist Sylvia von Harden* (1926) or Edward Burra's *Snack Bar* (1930) (no. x) in its overall conception and mood. Burra's barman seems to revel in his slicing of the fleshy pink ham whilst sneaking a furtive glance at the glamorous female customer consuming her snack; a menacing air of sexual tension pervades the scene. Burra, Dix and George Grosz all use satire with excoriating effect in their depictions of urban types, whereas Laserstein represents her women in self-absorbed contemplation, independent of a masculine gaze. *In the Tavern* depicts a public space for women to inhabit not as sexual commodities but as independent customers, taking their gloves off, serving drinks, reading the menu. Yet if positive possibilities for creative women seem to be part of the elusive promise of happiness during

the 1920s and 30s, the enjoyment was bitter-sweet. By 1933 Laserstein, a Jew, was no longer allowed to publicly exhibit her work and by 1937 she was exiled from her native Germany for good. The project of remaking society after the First World War was a complex entanglement of competing discourses and gendered divisions. No matter how much the popular press swept aside images of broken soldiers with maimed faces to make way for the figure of the ideal warrior and the new woman, the illusions of peace-time stability were extremely short-lived.

[1] For more information and statistics about the number of war-wounded, see Joanna Bourke *Dismembering the Male: Men's Bodies, Britain and the Great War* (London: Reaktion Books 1996); Deborah Cohen *The War Come Home: Disabled Veterans in Britain and Germany, 1914-1939* (California: University of California Press, 2001) and Heather R. Perry *Recycling the Disabled: Army, medicine and modernity in WW1 Germany* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014)

[2] For more details see Suzannah Biernoff 'Flesh Poems: Henry Tonks and the Art of Surgery' in *Visual Culture in Britain*, volume 11, issue 1, March 2010, pp.26-27 and Marjorie Gehhardt *The Men with Broken Faces: Gueules Cassées of the First World War* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2015).

[3] For a more in-depth analysis of Tonks' portraits, see Emma Chambers 'Fragmented Identities: Reading Subjectivity in Henry Tonks' surgical portraits' *Art History*, volume 32, issue 3, June 2009, pp.578-607.

[4] Hans Kinkel 'Begegnung mit Otto Dix' *Stuttgarter Zeitung*, November 30, 1961 cited in Dietrich Schubert 'Death in the Trench: The Death of the Portrait?' in Olaf Peters (ed.) *Otto Dix* (New York and Munich: Neue Galerie and Prestel Verlag, 2010), p.37.

[5] Otto Dix cited in Diether Schmidt *Otto Dix im Selbstbildnis* (Berlin, 1981), p.280.

[6] See Anne Marno 'The Etching Series *Der Krieg*' in Susanne Meyer-Büser (ed.) *Otto Dix - der böse Blick* (Düsseldorf: Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen and Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2017), p.186.

[7] Ann Murray 'A War of Images: Otto Dix and the Myth of the War Experience' in *Aigne* 5, 2014, p.61.

[8] Anne Marno 'The Etching Series *Der Krieg*' in Susanne Meyer-Büser (ed.) *Otto Dix*, (2017), p.184.

[9] Hal Foster, 'A Bashed Ego' in *Prosthetic Gods*, (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2004), p.151.

[10] Alice Lex-Nerlinger 'Erinnerungen' in Elspeth Moortgat (ed.) *Alice Lex-Nerlinger: Fotomonteurin und Malerin*, (Berlin: Das Verborgene Museum, 2016), p.100.

[11] Alice Lex-Nerlinger cited in Rachel Epp Buller 'Alice Lex' in Moortgat (ed.) ibid., p.155.